

# Brainstorming to Autonomy

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By *Leslie Bobb-Wolff*

The technique referred to as brainstorming is used when you want people, working together, to generate ideas on a specific topic. (See Footnote 1 below) As such, it can be a useful and enriching tool in the EFL classroom and a means of showing students that they are collectively capable of generating far more ideas to improve their learning process than they believed possible. This in turn, leads to an increase in their autonomy of learning and self-responsibility. Most of the examples included in this article come from second year university students studying English philology, but others are from secondary schools, EFL classes where the author first experimented with different types of student brainstorming. I believe, however, that the technique can be used successfully to enrich the classroom and promote learner autonomy within any subject in secondary, tertiary and adult studies.

In sum, I have found brainstorming to be useful in a wide range of areas as a device to help students identify their over-all classroom dynamics. But most importantly, it improves the quality of student participation and student production in class.

## I. Ways of Organizing Brainstorming

Whole-group brainstorming is what usually comes to mind when the term is used, but here we will also look at two other possible ways of organizing this technique which I found to be successful for generating students' ideas in a wide variety of areas. The first alternative is pyramid brainstorming; i.e., moving from small groups to the whole class. The second alternative concerns going from the individual to the whole class. After a presentation of these two variations I will discuss the whole- group activity of brainstorming. Among these three types only the first steps vary. As we shall see, the complexity of the area students brainstorm is what usually defines which type of organization will work best.

### Organization One: Pyramid Brainstorming - from Small Group to Whole Class

**Step 1 State the topic:** You, as the teacher, state the topic or write it on the blackboard (ex., "What one does to learn new vocabulary.") You then give any explanation that may be needed. The topic to brainstorm can also come from a single student or from a student group.

**Step 2 Generating ideas:** The students form groups of three or four. They can make their own suggestions usually by collaborating with the people around them, or follow teacher-suggested criteria, such as grouping with classmates they have not worked with recently, or classmates with whom they have not discussed this topic. Ask the small groups to talk and write down their

ideas. You can set a time limit or simply walk around the class. When you see that a group has two or three ideas written down, ask them to write them on the board. Then ask the other groups, to add on the board any thoughts or ideas that they may have. No attempt should be made to put things in any kind of order or make corrections or comments.

***Step 3 Clearing up ideas:*** When it appears that no new ideas are forthcoming, you ask the whole class or small groups to discuss the relevancy and the clarity of the ideas on the board. (Some ideas will most certainly be eliminated.) For example, if the topic is what is to be included on the next test, after the class has brainstormed, they go back over the list to make sure everything said during the brainstorming is relevant to the test (i.e. related to the objectives and contents to be covered on this test).

Now is the time to ask questions about anything that does not make sense. First ask if anyone in the class has any questions about what is on the board. You, yourself also may wish to ask questions. If some ideas seem too vague or general, ask the group who wrote them to explain what they mean and then add this new input to the board.

***Step 4 Choosing ideas:*** Ask everyone to copy the entire list to keep as a reference, or follow one of these four steps:

1. Each student or small group chooses one of the items on the board for a future task. For example, ask each one to choose one of the topics to develop a dialog or write an exam.
2. Each individual chooses and writes the ideas s/he considers most relevant or important. For example, if the topic is reading strategies, each student chooses those s/he thinks will be most useful personally.
3. Each class member chooses a given number of the items that s/he believes to be most important. For example, after the class has brainstormed all the new vocabulary from a lesson, each chooses eight items to add to his/her individual vocabulary list.
4. Ask the whole class to discard all but five or ten items on the blackboard. This can be done through discussion or voting. For example, if the topic is popular songs, the class votes to choose five songs they would most like to work on together.

## **Organization Two: From Individual to Whole Class**

***Step 1 State the topic:*** Same as above.

***Step 2 Generating ideas:*** Give each student three-to-six minutes to write his/her ideas on the selected topic. This step can also be assigned as homework.

***Step 3 Selecting ideas:*** Form pairs and ask each pair to make a list of their individual ideas, possibly limiting the number to eight ideas between the two. Set a time limit. Have the pairs

form groups of four, again sharing and combining their ideas into one list of a limited number of items. Set a time limit. Then, form groups of eight students.

Ask each group either to read the list of ideas or write the list on the blackboard. You may now need an alternate Step 3 (clearing up ideas) or you may go directly to step 4 (see organization one above), or you can ask each group for a copy of the list.

### **Organization Three: Whole Class Brainstorming**

In this type of organization, probably the most traditional form of brainstorming, the entire group works together from the beginning. Whole-class brainstorming is useful when individual students must come up with ideas without previous small group discussion period. I have used it to generate ideas concerning the concepts and content of a reading selection based only on the title. I have also used this organization when students are identifying places where they could find foreign speakers to interview.

Once the topic has been stated, the class members simply say whatever ideas occur to them. These may be written on the board, a transparency or by a secretary-often the teacher-or not written at all. The choice here depends on the outcome desired, the complexity of the brainstormed area, the size of the class and the dynamics within the group. As stated in Organization One, do not at this point correct or comment, but you may wish to ask for a more detailed or specific explanation. Time limits may help the students to learn how to think and say their ideas faster. Following this, go on to steps three and four in Organization One above.

### **Which Type of Brainstorming to Use**

I have found Organization One, pyramid brainstorming from the small group to the whole class, to be most useful where students have to reflect on how they do something and/or when small group discussions will help them generate more ideas. This includes work with strategies. We have found Organization Two, from individual to whole class, to be most suitable when we want students to clear up ideas individually before sharing or comparing them with others, such as choosing which vocabulary to learn from the new words. Organization Three, whole-class brainstorming, takes the least time but can have results which are less rich in ideas. It seems to work best for using simple topics which will interest most of the class in participating (ex., where to find foreigners to interview). Unfortunately, in whole-group brainstorming, the tendency is for contributions from only a few with the majority sitting passively. To encourage greater participation, switching to one or the other of the two alternatives can well be your solution.

## **II. Ways the Teacher Can Enhance a Brainstorming Activity**

Our experience has been that, when using this technique, students come up with a great many ideas, but we have also found it true that there are groups, or days, when the total number of ideas generated, or the quality of these ideas, leaves something to be desired.

## **Hints During Small Group Discussion**

In small group/pyramid brainstorming, once the students have been working a few minutes on generating ideas, I often go around to the groups and ask them what they have written so far. Sometimes students have ideas which are very general so I ask them how they can make them more specific. This helps them to generate more ideas. Other times the group has not understood clearly enough the area to be brainstormed and we can help them get back on track. You can also compliment them on what they have written or, say a few words in private to get a sleepy group thinking.

## **Compiling**

Putting together the lists of various groups of students and handing this cumulative list to all the groups can be one way to give the learners more ideas. This can include giving the group lists compiled by the class(es) from a previous year for incorporation into their own initial brainstorming lists.

## **Teacher's Input**

You, the teacher, may add your own ideas or suggestions to the list the students have accumulated on the board near the end of step two. For example, when brainstorming for strategies, to help make reading easier and more profitable, I have suggested the idea of reading a piece the first time as fast as possible to get a general idea, then re-reading it for details. In the area of defining what to include in a test, the teacher may wish to add something the students have not mentioned or may wish to eliminate a student suggestion. An example of the latter is including translation from their first language to the FL, an activity we had not done in class. (The students' response was that "there is always translation on our tests." After discussion, the group agreed to drop this item from their list of suggestions.)

## **III. Putting the Ideas into Practice**

Brainstorming, particularly on strategies, can generate ideas, but we also want to "push" the students towards putting these ideas into practice, ideas such as how to help yourself to read better or to improve composition writing.

With some areas we have found that simply giving out a photocopy of the final list of suggestions or ideas suffices. I have done this in areas such as the criteria for assessment which the students then use for their self-assessment.

For areas which the students will put into practice outside the classroom more often than in class, I ask the students to keep a "plan of action" in their notebook. This plan of action has two parts: The action (idea, strategy) itself and then, when, where, and how often it will be put into practice. (See Appendix 1 below) Each student makes a personal list and then adds new ideas as they appear. This means that after any topic is brainstormed, each student will choose one, two, or three items from the brainstormed list, add them to an individual "plan of action" including when, where, and how often s/he will try to do this.

About once a month, you, the teacher, can ask the students to write and hand in an assessment of their "plan of action," that is, what isn't working and why/why not. This pushes the students to keep track of their own work, to check if they are trying out new strategies, and evaluate which is/is not useful. The objective is to help the students organize their own learning, that is, to help them to acquire metacognitive strategies related to the organization and evaluation of their way of working.

#### **IV. How does Brainstorming Help Students become more Autonomous? Changing Attitudes and Acquiring Skills**

One outcome of student brainstorming, what they do and what they could do, is making them conscious of the strategies each already has. It also helps them discover what other classmates do. The former is useful because students are often unaware of how they go about a task themselves. The latter, because it has often never occurred to most of them that there is any other way to face a task other than their own habitual way. The realization that they can get ideas from their classmates is one more way to help students understand the teacher is not the only source for learning.

Asking students to brainstorm specific areas, contents, or processes, is a way of showing them, as opposed to simply telling them, how much they, individually and collectively, already know and know how to do. A blackboard covered with student ideas on a given area is an implicit message of this collective knowledge or ability. This message can be made explicit by the teacher pointing out to the group the number of ideas they have come up with or by asking them if they had expected that they would find so many possibilities before beginning the brainstorming activity. This is one way we have found to help students change their attitude towards their role in decision-making in their learning process.

Brainstorming, especially pyramid brainstorming, helps the student to become conscious of the skills s/he has already acquired, what s/he already does in order to learn and what else s/he could be doing. In other words, students identify the strategies they already have and also what other strategies s/he could be putting into practice.

Further, pyramid brainstorming helps each student to reflect on his/her present way of working, and to discover that this way is not the same as for someone else. This can come as quite a shock to students and teachers

As students become more conscious of how each one learns and of their capabilities of making decisions about their own learning process, they begin to acquire the ability to accept the responsibility of this learning process. They are now on their way to becoming more autonomous. Simultaneously, as the teacher sees the class of students collectively come up with ideas in a given area and then use these suggestions to improve their learning process while accepting greater responsibility for the in-class work and overall group dynamics, the teacher becomes more willing to let the students try working with ever greater amounts of autonomy. In this way the "snowball keeps growing."

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### **Footnote 1**

The definition given in Webster's New World Dictionary, 2nd edition is "the unrestrained offering of ideas or suggestions by all members of a conference to seek solutions to problems" (p. 171)

## **Appendix 1**

### PLAN OF ACTION (short term)

| Action (what?) | When? How Often?<br>Where? | Check<br>(dates) |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------------|
|                |                            |                  |